One-woman play a tribute to actress, refugee once given keys to the City of Grand Junction

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The late Broadway star Lilia Skala was a good friend of Colorado Mesa University's theatre department founder Bill Robinson. The two worked together in New York for the Children's World Theater.

Robinson will attend the international premiere of a show about Lilia, a play about Lilia, Skala, written and performed by her granddaughter Libby Skala, when it comes to the Robinson Theatre Saturday, Sept. 7.

Skala was an actress in Germany during that era caused by oppression and had been imprisoned by the Nazis. They left the country after Skala bribed one of the guards for his release.

Their assets were frozen by the Nazis; thus, the family arrived in the United States practically penniless and not speaking English.

Skala went to work in a garment factory but never abandoned her dream of acting. In 1957, she won an Oscar and Golden Globe nominations. She also won Golden Globe and Emmy nominations for "Roseane" and "Eleonor and Franklin," respectively.

"Lilia!" is about her extraordinary life, as well as the mentoring relationship between grandmother and granddaughter.

"She took me under her wing; she shared her stories and lessons to inspire and educate me on the way of the world," Libby said.

Skala was pleased that her granddaughter, Libby, was interested in the craft of acting, because of her profession was looked down upon— even considered akin to prostitution, Libby said.

The idea for "Lilia!" came to Libby during a 1997 improvisation class after she was asked to talk about someone compelling, or fascinating. Libby spoke about her grandmother's experience as an immigrant and fleeing the Third Reich.

The instructor was particularly intrigued after learning about Skala's successful acting career in the U.S. He encouraged Libby to write a one-woman show about her grandmother.

"I had no idea how to encapsulate 58 years into an hour and a half," Libby said.

She began writing down her memories and with the help of her improv coach, Gary Austin, developed and completed the script. In 2000, Libby began touring and performing the show— a moving account of a woman who overcame extraordinary odds.

Libby said she especially wanted to come to Grand Junction because Robinson had never seen the production and "he was a very significant person in my grandmother's life."

As a former director of the field's English theater department, Robinson encouraged Libby to write the one-woman show about her grandmother's experiences. Libby was able to persuade her to come out and perform in "Lilies of the Field." After the film screening, Skala spoke to the audience, and the "city father" at the time presented her with a key to the city, Robinson said.

Skala traveled to Grand Junction to perform at the college on four other occasions up until 1981.

"It was an exciting time," said Robinson, who attributes the actress' performance and presence locally to convincing the college president to construct a building for the theatre department.

Libby has performed "Lilia!" across the nation and abroad including England, Germany, Scotland, the Republic of Georgia, and Canada.

She received a "Best Solo Performer Award" at the London Fringe Theatre Festival for her second show "A Time to Dance" about her great-aunt, Australian modern dancer and dance therapy pioneer Elizabeth Polk.

Libby third show "Felecia" was performed at Emerging Artists Theatre One Woman Standing Festival in New York City. She has also performed in a number of non-solo theatre productions and has appeared in two films.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Libby Skala performs the one-woman show "Lilia!" about her grandmother Lilia Skala, a refugee of Nazi Germany who went on to star in "Lilies of the Field" with Sidney Poitier.